

Employers: Implement positive change with a family “care culture”

Three recent caregiving reports (Harvard Business School’s The Caring Company, Torchlight’s “Modern Caregiving Challenges Facing U.S. Employees, and Northeast Business Group on Health’s recent caregiving survey) had similar (and important) findings regarding caregiving issues that impact thousands of employers and millions of their employees. Today’s employee caregivers are exhausted, overwhelmed and stressed as they try to juggle family responsibilities with the demands of their jobs. Without proper support from their employers, the ability to succeed at both seems out of reach.

The reports state that when it comes to caregiving, there’s no “one size fits all” solution. They also found that employers can (and should!) help their employees who are struggling to manage both caregiving and work responsibilities. According to these studies, if employers provide caregiving support and benefits, they’ll enjoy positive business outcomes, including higher retention rates, increased productivity, fewer absences, and happier employees.

Three-quarters of today’s employees are caring for family members or other loved ones, so employers must take a proactive approach to offering family care benefits and support.

While many companies offer attractive salaries, health insurance, and vacation time, it hasn’t been the norm to provide family care benefits to support employee caregivers. But the reluctance to provide family care benefits appears to be changing.

On any given day, 20 percent of employees are disengaged or physically absent due to caregiving responsibilities, per [Gallup research](#). In fact, caregiving responsibilities contribute to a tremendous [\\$38.2 billion annually in lost productivity costs](#) to U.S. businesses.

Employee caregivers often have to handle family responsibilities during the workday. That could mean spending time out of the office for doctors’ visits or school meetings. While at work, they often spend time coordinating care – making doctors’ appointments, talking to the school about an IEP, or unraveling the aftermath of an internet scam. These seemingly “small” things – a meeting, a phone call, an appointment – add up. These tasks can be distracting and stressful for employees, contributing to lost productivity at work.

Employers: Be a Driving Force for Positive Change

Companies are facing a crisis at the intersection of work and family care. It’s been proven that both employers and employees are negatively impacted by caregiving demands and distractions. As highlighted in Torchlight’s Modern Caregiving [report](#) and a recent [Harvard Business School report](#), there are two major factors contributing to the caregiving crisis:

1. The lack of supportive infrastructure around family care; and
2. Non-supportive work environments.

While that sounds grim, there is a solution. Employers can drive positive change by implementing “care

cultures” at their organizations. With a care culture in place, employees are given the support, tools, and resources they need to successfully balance their caregiving and professional responsibilities, without fear of repercussions.

Many employers either don't think about the caregiving issue that's impacting their staff, or they simply don't know how to help their employees balance work and caregiving responsibilities. Unfortunately, most benefits packages don't address the root cause of stress and time out of work for employee caregivers. But **there's an enormous opportunity for businesses to be a driving force for positive change.** Creating, implementing, and promoting a “care culture” in your workplace doesn't have to be an overwhelming, difficult, or costly undertaking. And the result? Significant benefits for both employers and employees.

What is “Modern Caregiving”?

Historically, caregiving has been defined as caring for an aging loved one or a relative with a disease or diagnosis. Yet modern caregiving is much broader, encompassing a far wider range of issues than ever before. Today's caregivers are managing complex, ongoing issues, such as cyberbullying, undiagnosed behavioral issues, elder scams, screen time addictions, or LGBTQ+ discrimination.

Modern caregivers face huge responsibilities on a daily basis. Their biggest stressors are often the ongoing challenges, decision making and the emotional impact of the journey itself. It's more than coping with their mother's dementia diagnosis. It's worrying about whether she can live alone, exploring the range of appropriate options, and negotiating a plan with siblings, all while maintaining her dignity. The responsibilities of modern caregiving can be overwhelming, frightening, frustrating and time-consuming, and many employees struggle to handle it all.

Yes, many people are still caring for elderly and ill loved ones which falls under the “traditional” caregiving definition. But they're also dealing with their son's behavioral issues at school, their teen daughter who attempted suicide after relentless online bullying, or the aftermath of their father losing significant money in an internet scam. Many caregivers don't know where to turn for help while they're in the midst of these difficult, emotional issues.

Implementing a “Care Culture” Doesn't Need to be Overwhelming

Harvard Business School (HBS) recently coined the phrase “care culture,” as it relates to supporting caregiving employees and their families. According to HBS, creating a “care culture” can help reduce employees' stress and absenteeism and increase their productivity, happiness, loyalty, and motivation.

Adopting a care culture will drive positive change. Action steps to accomplish this include:

- **Secure senior management's support.** Outline the proven business benefits of adopting a care culture, emphasizing that this can be easy, inexpensive, and *important* to implement. Provide these reports to management to make the business case for a care culture and substantiate the benefits of doing so. Company leaders should demonstrate - with words and actions - that they support the new care culture. Additionally, they should encourage employees to use the family care benefits available to them.
- **Look at clues.** Beyond employee surveys, look for clues in the data sources around you. For instance, draw inferences from claims data on child-related therapies such as speech/language, occupational therapy, etc. Also, examine caregiver-related leave data. While employers can get some value from surveys, employees aren't always forthright, as they're ultimately looking to preserve their careers, or may not identify themselves as caregivers.
- **Train managers.** Managers should be trained on how to talk to their employees about caregiving, sensitively and appropriately. Ensure all managers are knowledgeable about the company's caregiving policies as well as when to encourage employees to use the benefits that best meet their needs.

- **Empower employees.** Focus on empowering employees, and even forming employee resource groups, which are one of the best vehicles for growing and sustaining a care culture. Ensure that your employees don't feel alone on their caregiving journeys.
- **Offer creative, flexible approaches to solve caregiving challenges.** Many caregiving demands take place during the work day. It's when Dad's doctor calls with an update, or when an initial educational evaluation is scheduled at school. When employees can't easily address the demands of caregiving, it increases their stress, impacts their ability to focus on their work, and often leads to increased absenteeism, reduction in hours, or job flight. Offer creative solutions to address caregiving demands. Designate office space for private, time-sensitive phone calls. Approve flex time that allows an employee to attend a school meeting in the morning and "make up" the work hours later that evening. Provide telecommuting options for an employee helping an ailing relative out-of-state. Think imaginatively about what your company can do to support caregivers. Many of these approaches cost little to nothing, yet the payoff is tremendous.

Adam Goldberg, M.Ed is the Founder and CEO of [Torchlight](#), which recently released a pioneering study, "[Modern Caregiving Challenges Facing U.S. Employees](#)," the first-of-its-kind in the caregiving employee benefits market. Adam has been featured on NPR's Here & Now and in the Boston Globe, Wall Street Journal, US News & World Report, New York Times, Mass High Tech, Forbes, Employee Benefit News, TNL, Chief Executive Magazine, and Boston Business Journal, in addition to showcases at the DNC, RNC and The White House.